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EDU 402

Then and Now: How My Experiences Have Shaped Me as A Teacher-in-Training

I went to a Catholic school from kindergarten through 8th grade. At that school, the expectation was for students to learn about the guiding principles of Catholicism while also receiving a well-rounded academic education. I started school a year early, and I was the youngest person in my class for most of my life. I have always been a perfectionist. I take great pride in never failing to showcase my best work. My Catholic school was very small, and I knew my peers very well. The teachers were able to give me a lot of individual attention and thoughtful feedback on my work. As a result, I gained confidence, and became comfortable talking in class.

When I went to a public high school with 1,400 students, my world opened up. Students at Quincy High School were expected to “think for themselves, work together, and share with the world”. A lot of my classes were discussion-based with occasional lectures, though sometimes it was vice versa. My school offered vocational programs, too, where I got hands-on experience in caring for elderly people as nursing assistant.

My Dad never did well in school, and as a result he’s worked as a manual laborer for his entire life. My Mom excelled in school, but had to drop out of college after a couple of semesters because she couldn’t afford to keep going. While they originally wanted me to go to a college in Massachusetts, they realized how badly I wanted to go to school in Western Maine and have been extremely supportive of me. I can’t thank them enough for that.

Getting an education is a necessity, but it’s often treated as if it’s a luxury. I remember how anxious so many of my friends were once they got accepted to the colleges of their dreams. Instead of celebrating, they agonized over how much debt they were going to be in. It breaks my heart to know that there are people out there who want an education but don’t have access to it, or can’t fully commit themselves to it because of problems they face outside of the classroom. It’s even more disheartening that these people are then punished by being forced into jobs that don’t pay them enough or provide the benefits they need to live safe and fulfilling lives.

In elementary school, my teachers gave me the opportunity to learn through lots of hands-on activities and play, and I’m really thankful for those experiences. In high school, I became acquainted with doing group projects, science experiments, mock trials, debates, Socratic seminars, and much more. My favorite activity was when I was randomly paired with a classmate and asked to write a piece of fiction with them. It was a challenging writing assignment, and it allowed me to get to know a classmate better.

I learn best in environments where teachers are patient. I like when content is taught step-by-step. Diagrams, acronyms, and information that can be condensed into bullet points helps, too. One of my most memorable teachers was Ms. Conlon. She was my math teacher my senior year of high school. I have always struggled with math, and in high school I barely scraped by. The teachers were all very intelligent, but it always seemed like I was missing a step. When I asked questions, I was usually accused of not paying attention. During my senior year, everything changed. Ms. Conlon helped me really understand math for the first time. She was so intelligent and kind; she never made me feel stupid for asking a question in class. She would gladly explain each step of a problem multiple times if it helped someone understand it better. Her dedication to ensuring that students really *understood* the material made me feel smart and valued for the first time ever in a math class.

I was privileged enough to go to a private school where all of my peers were upper middle class or upper class. Public school was really different. I liked meeting people from a variety of different cultures, family-structures and socioeconomic backgrounds. Knowing so many different types of people has made me a much more open-minded and empathetic person.

In elementary and middle school, there were only about 14 students in all of my classes. Looking back, I know now that some of these students were very gifted, while others had undiagnosed learning disabilities. As a result, I think that the gifted students were often bored and the struggling students felt really isolated and unintelligent. I wish that those teachers had differentiated more. In high school, all of the classes were grouped into three categories: standard, honors, and advanced/AP. I was in a mix of honors and advanced classes, but some electives were a mixed class of students at the honors and standard levels. In my AP classes, I soaked up knowledge like a sponge. Being able to take classes that were at different levels really helped me. I’m really thankful for all the time that teachers spent pushing me to try new things and expand my comfort zone. In my electives, though, I felt like the students at the standard level weren’t given enough support. I noticed that lots of students had their headphones in or slept during class. They were asked to do less than the honors students in the class were, but the teachers never asked them what they were interested in or how they could help them learn based on their strengths. I wish they had.

I’m a very open-minded person. I welcome all people and am open to a variety of perspectives. Ensuring that *all* students feel represented, valued, and included is very important to me. I know that life (and high school) can be really hard. I fell in love with literature because it helped me to see the beauty in the world, and I want to show students that beauty, too. At the same time, I want students to learn how to think critically and express themselves in sophisticated ways in order to prepare them for their prosperous lives. I want them to learn about love and kindness and what it means to be human in my classroom. I want to have a library in my classroom where students can have access to all kinds of books whenever they want them. I want students to be able to go home and shut out the rest of the world when they’re reading. I want them to be able to learn on their terms, for the most part.

In my opinion, the best teachers are, first and foremost, kind. They are patient, understanding, approachable, and knowledgeable. They engage students, through laughter or the ability to come to class each day and perform in such a way that students can’t help but be engaged. They are flexible and ready to try something else if their lesson plan isn’t going as planned. They are there because they care about the students, above all else. I want to be just like that.

I want to help high school students. I want to nudge them into questioning what they’ve been taught to believe. I want to give them something to think about. I want to make their lives brighter. I want to teach students how to express themselves through writing and figure out what they value. I want them to see all the beauty that life has to offer.

I never want my students to take tests. I don’t want them to have to memorize anything. That’s why I worry I won’t be a great teacher. I want my students to be able to, for the most part, pick up a book and read it and talk about it. I want them to write about whatever they want in diary entries or poems or blog posts. I want them to know that they’re going to have a lot of freedom very soon, and encourage them to do something positive with it. I don’t think there should be curriculum standards. I don’t think anyone can decide what all students *need* to know. As a result, I don’t know how well I’ll get along with administrators. I fear that I won’t meet the standards.